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Interviews and Profiles





Sonal Basu

HEAD OF LEGAL – AMERICAS

MINDTREE

Many lawyers fall into in-house roles after working for a law firm tires them. Some are brought to in-house counsel by their former clients, while others are dead-set on working with a business.

“I was very clear,” says Sonal Basu, head of legal for the Americas region for Mindtree, an IT services provider. “I just wanted to be affiliated with corporate and commercial law as an in-house counsel.”

Sonal grew up in the state of Maharashtra, in the western part of India, where her late father worked for an aviation company and her mother was a homemaker. Her uncle, who worked as a physician in London, urged her go into the medical field. She, however, was determined to become a corporate lawyer.

Sonal studied at the Government Law College in Mumbai, (erstwhile ‘Bombay’) and continued her education at the London School of Economics, where she completed her master’s in corporate and commercial law. While studying internationally, she was struck by the different approach to legal education. “In India, it’s very exam-oriented,” she explains, “which is not the case outside India, where it is concept-based learning and you actually learn the nuances of different regimes.”

In addition to formal education opportunities, she learned a lot from interacting with other students from around the world. “The experience helped me become more inclusive,” Sonal describes.

From London to Bangalore

After completing her studies, she returned to India to pursue her dream of working for a corporation. She joined Wipro, an information technology, consulting, and outsourcing company in 2003 as legal counsel. She was based in Bangalore, which is sometimes called the “Silicon Valley of India” because of the high number of technology firms based in the city. Her role involved drafting and negotiating IT services agreements.

Sonal enjoyed her time at Wipro but felt like she needed to expand her legal experience. Despite her love of in-house work, she knew the value of working for a law firm as well: “You cater to clients across all industries and are not confined to just one.”

During her career, she joined firms when opportunities arose to gain more experience. After her initial stint at Wipro, Sonal joined leading law firm J. SAGAR Associates where she polished her tradecraft.

After couple of years with the firm, she moved back to in-house, taking a job with Nokia advising the company on telecom law and general corporate matters. A reunion with Wipro followed, this time as senior corporate counsel. It was also the first time she spent most of her time working on disputes and compliance domains for APAC and the Americas region.

Another short stint at a law firm concluded her firm experience. She headed the technology practice at L.A.W. (Lawyers at Work), which gave her a greater understanding of her industry.

Joining Mindtree

Sonal joined Mindtree global IT company in September 2014 as a legal director. In early 2016, she was promoted to head of legal for the Americas region. She is the only member of the nine-person legal department that is based in the United States. The rest of the team is in Bangalore.

The IT Company is an Indian multinational corporation founded in 1999. It employs about 17,000 people in 42 offices in 17 countries. Mindtree’s most important region is the Americas, where 65 percent of its revenue is generated. European revenue represents 25 percent, while the APAC region contributes about 10 percent.

The company works with Global 2000 corporations to use technology to spur business growth, particularly via digital transformations and IT efficiency in industries such as travel, retail, insurance, banking, and high-tech,” Sonal says.

No matter what industry the company is supporting, Sonal is there to make sure the company acts ethically. A big part of her job is conducting trainings on ethics and compliances. “The message is there are no shades of gray, everything is black and white,” she says.

When evaluating companies targeted for acquisition, Sonal says it’s all about looking at different forms of assets. “I check their IP, whether they have any third party infringement claims, if there are any liens of assets, if they have appropriate processes, and whether they are in a position to retain employees,” she says.

The role of any in-house counsel is to highlight the risks to management when they are making an acquisition because a company can have a very good revenue stream, but its liabilities may result in a costly legal battle. She also stresses that companies should have good long-term contracts to acquire clientele.

Sonal's day-to-day routine involves a lot of business meetings, trainings, interacting with external counsels, negotiating, and drafting. She is also on the board of Mindtree's Culture Protection Committee to investigate complaints and concerns raised by whistleblowers.

Despite her hectic schedule, she loves her job. What's her favorite part? "I love to do trainings but I also love negotiations a lot. I work with different teams in my role, including finance, delivery, and CXOs. I really like everything about my job."

Getting to know.... Sonal Basu

IF YOU COULD VACATION ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD, WHERE WOULD YOU GO?

I have been to very different destinations when I travel. I was in Tanzania. I was in Bhutan. My next destination would be Machu Picchu in Peru. That's something which I want to explore. I want to go to the Rocky Mountains also. I'm not an expert trekker, but I'm a big trekking nerd.

WHAT'S THE CRAZIEST BUSINESS MEETING YOU'VE EVER BEEN A PART OF?

Many years ago, when I was a young lawyer, I was in a meeting where the senior lawyer was negotiating with someone from Australia, and the negotiation got really sticky because there was a roadblock on a lot of things like showstopper clauses. I remember there came a moment where one of the lawyers really got aggressive and the lawyer from Australia just walked out of the room, which was very strange. We didn't know what was happening. Then he comes back and tells us that typically, when negotiations stall in Australia, instead of escalating the confrontation, they just step out and step back. That was quite a different experience for me in terms of business meetings.

WHAT DO YOU DO IN YOUR FREE TIME?

I go running or I walk. I love reading, but I don't get much time to read with two kids. I'm a mother of two boys, and they make it a point that I spend each second with them when I'm at home. Unless I go to the library and read, or read when they are fast asleep, I'm not in a position to read as much as I would like to.

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